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## THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

# A Dog Film That's Actually About a Dog



New Yorker Films

The British author J.R. Ackerley, voiced by Christopher Plummer in the movie *My Dog Tulip*, was well into his 50s when he acquired Tulip, and in this ebullient animal the distant Englishman encountered the ideal friend for whom he had been searching all his life.

By Mikita Brottman | NOVEMBER 14, 2010 ✓  
PREMIUM

Dog lovers attending the Cannes Film Festival may be less interested in who takes home the Palme d'Or than in who wins the Palm Dog—an award honoring "the best canine performance across all the sections of the festival." This year's honoree was Boss the boxer, who won the coveted golden collar for his performance in *Tamara Drewe* (2010), the new film by Stephen Frears.

Recent nominees have not always been flesh-and-blood dogs, however; in 2009 the award went to Dug, a canine character in the Pixar-Disney animated adventure *Up*, written and directed by Pete Docter and Bob Peterson. But there was no nomination at Cannes this year for the animated protagonist of *My Dog Tulip*, directed and designed by the married couple Paul and Sandra Fierlinger and unleashed in America this fall. It is not difficult to see why. Unlike Boss, Dug, and their lovable pals, Tulip is rather too real for comfort.

This raises the question: Are dog movies ever truly about dogs? There are plenty of films involving dogs performing spectacular tricks (Lassie and Rin Tin Tin are perhaps the best-known examples). But the most popular dog films, in my opinion, are not about dogs so much as the human beings they live among. Rarely do such films delve into the more unsavory details of canine life; most of the time, in the movies, life with a dog is a

never-ending adventure. *Marley and Me* (2008), based on the best-selling book by the journalist John Grogan, is a typical case in point. Although the neurotic Marley is cheerfully called "the world's worst dog," his foibles are instantly forgivable. In his youth, like most puppies, he is playful and boisterous, and enjoys happily chewing up and ruining expensive possessions. He also suffers from a morbid fear of thunderstorms, pulls over tables in outdoor restaurants, and inflicts no end of hijinks on his long-suffering dog-sitters. All this is played for laughs, of course, as is the scene in which Marley swallows a valuable necklace belonging to Grogan's wife, Jenny (Jennifer Aniston), and Grogan (Owen Wilson) has to wait for it to emerge from the dog's rear end (and then, with a watering hose, has to separate the gold from the dross).

Inevitably, *Marley and Me* was a huge box-office hit, and was described by critics as "hilarious," "heartwarming," and "unforgettable." The film did not play at Cannes, but even if it had, Marley would not have been eligible for the Palm Dog, since it took no fewer than 22 different yellow Labradors to play the part. These multiple Marleys seem somehow indicative of the film's treatment of its supposed protagonist. Although the movie ostensibly centers on the dog, Marley's role is actually to lead us through the ups and downs of 15 years of Grogan family life. The pet's purpose, as in most dog films, is to catch the attention of the audience and, like Hitchcock's famous MacGuffin, to drive forward the human plot.

This is also true of *Hotel for Dogs*, a 2009 film by Thor Freudenthal based on the 1971 Lois Duncan novel of the same name and produced by DreamWorks Pictures. Although almost 70 dogs appear in the film, the story is that of Andi (Emma Roberts) and Bruce (Jake T. Austin), two orphans who open a canine retreat for dogs they have rescued from the threat of euthanasia. While—at least superficially—the film brings up the issue of unwanted pets and the sad end in store for most shelter animals, these subjects are blurred into a child-friendly fantasy of happy, playful dogs living out their days in luxury.

Slightly less awash in sentiment is the 2007 film *Year of the Dog*, the story of Peggy (Molly Shannon), a shy, forty-something administrative assistant whose life is turned upside down by the death of her faithful companion, Pencil. As an indirect result of Pencil's death, Peggy adopts an abused dog and gets involved with the local pet shelter.

Before long she has stopped wearing fur, become a vegan, and started to use her boss's checkbook to support animal-friendly causes. Family and friends consider her unhinged, but although her love life has come to a dead end, the film has what many would consider to be a happy ending: Peggy finds new fellowship with animals and the humans who care about them.

There is very little human fellowship to be had in *My Dog Tulip*, closely based on the 1956 book of the same name by the British author J.R. Ackerley, which Christopher Isherwood described as one of the "greatest masterpieces of animal literature." Uniquely, *Tulip* is a dog movie in which the dog is truly the center of the film—and she actually resembles a real dog, too, not a Disney dog or a DreamWorks dog. Unlike more crowd-pleasing films, the animation in *Tulip* has a raw quality, and includes strange flights of fancy in which Tulip dresses in a tutu, wears sunglasses, and, in one episode, flies happily through the air.

So central is Tulip to this film that there is very little about her we do not know; indeed, some might feel we know far more than we need to. And while you certainly don't have to be a dog lover to enjoy this film, even the most devout dog lovers may find themselves cringing at the lurid details of Tulip's not-so-private life.

The film, like the book on which it is based, tells the story of the author's relationship with his German shepherd (a breed normally referred to as an Alsatian in Britain because of anti-German sentiment left over from the wartime years). It is, in short, a love story.

"Unable to love each other," observed J.R. Ackerley in a dictum used to introduce the movie version of *My Dog Tulip*, "the English turn instinctively to dogs." This may not be true of all the English, but it definitely applied to Ackerley himself (voiced in the film by Christopher Plummer), a gentle man of letters who spent most of his quiet life living in London and working for the BBC. He was well into his 50s when he acquired Tulip, and in this ebullient animal, the distant Englishman encountered the "ideal friend" for whom he had been searching all his life. As the tag line for the film puts it, "Sometimes, love really can be a bitch."

Ackerley is a natural loner, and Tulip, despite her erratic, aggressive, and often infuriating behavior, provides him with more satisfying and loyal companionship than he has ever found in another human being. Some might describe his relationship with Tulip as codependent, even pathological. He loves to watch her toilet habits, for example, and feels that those buried in the graveyard Tulip uses for her morning dump should be honored to have such a beautiful creature leave offerings on their graves. Even more disturbing to the modern sensibility is Ackerley's failure to clean up after his companion—except when commanded to do so by an angry greengrocer whose shop doorway Tulip spectacularly befouls.

Indeed, so strong is Ackerley's attachment to Tulip that he even allows her to bear a litter so she is not denied the essential experience of motherhood. His energetic attempts to find her a suitable mate constitute the most lurid part of the film, as Ackerley takes Tulip, in heat, to meet a variety of potential mates whose attitudes to sex seem to be reflected in the demeanor of their owners. She is introduced to a series of suitable males of her own breed—the handsome, heavy Max; a nervous charmer named Chum; and the aristocratic Mountjoy—but rejects them all in favor of "a disreputable, dirty mongrel" named Dusty, who gives her venereal disease. The film's depiction of such antics is fairly literal, giving it what critics guardedly refer to as "an adult sensibility" (although a cartoon, *My Dog Tulip* is not family viewing). As Plummer's voice waxes rhapsodic about "this exquisite creature in the midst of her desire," we are shown a vivid montage involving eager suitors sniffing Tulip's gleaming vaginal folds.

When she gives birth—here again, no detail is spared—Ackerley plans to drown her puppies in the bath, but finds himself unable to do so. Tulip quickly grows bored with them, and the Englishman needs to get them out of his flat. As a result, they are given to various acquaintances and strangers, and this series of events leads to one of Ackerley's most moving reflections, part of which is used to conclude the film:

"Meeting the mild, worried brown eyes that often studied me and my friendly hand with doubt, I realized clearly, perhaps for the first time, what strained and anxious lives dogs must lead, so emotionally involved in the world of men, whose affections they strive endlessly to secure, whose authority they are expected unquestioningly to obey, and

whose mind they can never do more than imperfectly reach and comprehend."

Contemplating the potential suffering of the puppies he has given away, Ackerley embarks on a series of profound and troubling philosophical meditations, making the likes of *Marley and Me* seem cheaply sentimental in comparison. Still, *My Dog Tulip* is not for everyone, and if you're not prepared to watch a sleeping dog break wind, it might be better for you to let it lie.

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